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Review of *The Professor's House* By Willa Cather

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The Professor's House. By Willa Cather. Historical essay by James Woodress. Explanatory notes by James Woodress and Kari A. Ronning. Textual editing by Frederick M. Link. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002. xii + 574 pp. \$75.00.

Although less familiar to most readers than *O Pioneers!*, *My Ántonia*, or *Death Comes for*

the *Archbishop*, *The Professor's House* (1925) is arguably Willa Cather's most important novel of the 1920s. Thematically, the book is exceptionally far ranging. As Cather's closest approach to a novel of the Jazz Age, *The Professor's House* offers a portrait of conspicuous consumption occasionally reminiscent of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. As a portrait of post-World-War-I disillusionment, the novel bears comparison with Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*. And then there is the narrative's timely concern with the health of American higher education, especially the Liberal Arts tradition, amid a culture preoccupied (then as now) with quantifiable results. Whether approached as a portrait of the Roaring Twenties, an analysis of "the great catastrophe" represented by World War I, or as a campus novel whose insights into university life and politics still hold true today, *The Professor's House* stands among its author's most complex and rewarding creations.

At 575 pages, the Willa Cather Scholarly Edition of *The Professor's House* does full justice to Cather's richly allusive—and elusive—art. Nearly 50 pages of explanatory notes provide information on every conceivable facet of the text, from the flora and fauna of Wisconsin and New Mexico to the refinement of early twentieth-century aircraft engines. An historical essay, supplemented by Cather's 1916 *Denver Times* article on Mesa Verde (reprinted in full), outlines the novel's sources and reception. A section of illustrations provides a visual context. And, best of all, a textual essay (followed by a list of emendations and rejected substantives) sheds new light on Cather's creative practices.

Readers new to *The Professor's House* will probably skip the nearly 200 pages of material this volume devotes to matters of textual history. In doing so, they will miss out on a scholarly tour de force. In his brilliant textual essay, Frederick M. Link compares several versions of the novel (including a typescript of *The Professor's House* recently donated to the University of Nebraska-Lincoln as part of the Philip L. and Helen Cather Southwick Col-

lection), delineates the decisions that determined the text offered in this new edition, and, in the process, gives us a fresh picture of Willa Cather at work. Through Link's discussion of textual variations, we learn of Cather's relatively apathetic attitude toward the serialized version of *The Professor's House* (run in *Collier's* magazine) and, in contrast, her almost tyrannical control of the first edition published by Knopf, a control that extended beyond matters of punctuation and phraseology to the actual design of the book—its margins, type style, color and weight of paper, and so forth. Moreover, Link's analysis of the Southwick typescript reinforces this image of Cather as the ultimate literary perfectionist: in one emendation after another we see Cather honing her prose, achieving ever greater precision and coherence.

An achievement worthy of the masterpiece at its center, the Willa Cather Scholarly Edition of *The Professor's House* is a major addition to Cather studies.

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